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The Public Poetics of Celia Alvarez Muñoz

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The Public Poetics of Celia Alvarez Muñoz

by

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Abstract

The Public Poetics of Celia Alvarez Muñoz

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This thesis concentrates on the public art practice of Celia Alvarez Muñoz (born 1937 in El Paso, Texas), focusing specifically on *El Río Habla (The River Speaks)*, 2000-01, located on the River Walk in San Antonio, Texas. In this work, Muñoz employs poetry, water, space, and artifacts to tell the story of the San Antonio River. This public artwork also reveals the primary qualities and concerns of Muñoz's practice, namely language, history, time, and place. Throughout my analysis of *El Río Habla*, my approach concentrates on the experiences of looking, reading, listening, and moving while also offering interpretations of the poetry, which is the central feature of the work. While *El Río Habla* is the primary focus of this thesis, I also examine Muñoz's practice through three other works across a variety of genres: a public art project in a light rail station, a museum installation, and an artist's book. I demonstrate that her work in public art, though rarely the subject of scholarship, is equally critical to understanding her practice as the books, photography, and installations for which she is best known. I maintain that her multimedia practice is characterized by her keen attention to local contexts, histories, and communities,

as she uncovers hidden and neglected histories of the places in which she is working. Ultimately, this thesis argues that *El Río Habla* is a critical work of place-specific public art, as it subverts the dominant narratives of San Antonio's history, reveals the city's obscured histories, and centers the river as a foundational yet continually changing force and place within the city.

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Introduction

On the eastern edge of the Main Plaza in San Antonio, Texas, a set of steps leads down to a small park, the Portal San Fernando. This park connects the plaza, home to the historic San Fernando Cathedral and Spanish Governor's Palace, to the San Antonio River Walk, one of the top tourist destinations in the city. On a landing halfway down this staircase, a fountain flows. Water cascades from one trough into another, then pours down into a small pool. Above this pool and set into the fountain, a panel bears four lines of poetic text carved into the limestone surface. Alternating between English and Spanish, the words speak of the *río* that was tamed and dubbed San Antonio. Small metal items—keys, horseshoes, a crucifix, a rosary, a bell—are embedded into the ground in front of the fountain, peeking out through the concrete surface. These elements—the objects, text, fountains, and steps—comprise one of six sections of the public artwork *El Río Habla (The River Speaks)*, 2000-01, by Celia Alvarez Muñoz (Fig.1).

Muñoz created six niches throughout the park, each combining the above components, to tell the story of the San Antonio River. Written from the perspective of the river, Muñoz's poem conveys its histories not normally recognized by urban beautification, tourism, or economic growth. The river speaks of the time before humans inhabited its banks; it remembers Native American history and acknowledges the struggles of the Great Depression. It also nods to the new millennium, pondering the river's potential future. The embedded objects recall archaeological artifacts, suggesting the countless layers of history

that the river contains. The river itself, as well as the fountains that mirror it, prompts recognition of the enduring importance of this natural resource. The water's constant flow, both visible and audible, suggests the perpetual passage of time and echoes the movement of people through the park and the surrounding areas. The four entrances to the park allow the public to enter the river's narrative at multiple points, disrupting a chronological path or the perception of a linear history, while the park itself is a liminal space, bridging the plaza at street level and the river below.

With its picturesque walkways and boat tours, riverfront hotels, shops, and restaurants, the River Walk reflects San Antonio's modern and ongoing tourist industry and urban development. The Main Plaza, with the Spanish colonial architecture of the cathedral and palace, stands as a testament to Spanish colonization. Linking these two sites in downtown San Antonio, the Portal San Fernando and *El Río Habla* straddle these two narratives that dominate the mythology of the city. Muñoz recognizes these histories but refuses to privilege them, instead revealing stories that are often obscured by these mainstream accounts. Calling attention to the history prior to European arrival, one text panel refers to *Yanawana*, the original place name of the area used by the Payaya people.[1] In the section that considers the future of the river, the river states that it is open to more change but also asks the public how they will care for it when it is "*viejo y seco*."

[1] The Payaya people were a Coahuiltecan band and the earliest known inhabitants of the region that became San Antonio, first recorded by Spanish explorers in 1691. Their village, which was located at the current site of San Pedro Springs Park, was called Yanawana (or Yanaguana), though this name may have also referred to the river.

This thesis argues that Muñoz's *El Río Habla* speaks of the obscured centrality of the river to San Antonio and reveals how histories are constructed, told, and grounded within place. Employing Lucy Lippard's definition of "place-specificity" as outlined in her 1997 book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, I maintain that *El Río Habla* is a place-specific public art project, as it draws from the landscapes and histories grounded in its specific location rather than merely responding to the architecture of its site.[2] Conjuring the city's obscured histories through the San Antonio River, Muñoz weaves together moments across time. While *El Río Habla* incorporates words carved into stone, a classic marker of traditional public monuments, its poetic texts challenge notions of permanence, fixed histories, and static relationships to the past. I argue that this public artwork subverts the dominant mythologies of the city by revealing neglected histories, pointing to the future, and emphasizing the river. Setting aside the usual monuments of San Antonio—the Spanish missions, the Alamo and the Texas Revolution, the Tower of the Americas and the HemisFair '68, and even the commercial River Walk—Muñoz instead centers the river itself as a foundational, life-sustaining, and continually changing force and place in the city. As Muñoz employs poetry, water, artifacts, and space, she compels us to read, listen, look, and move as we explore the work. As a place-specific public art project, *El Río Habla* reflects on the passage of time, challenges static histories, and reveals the power of place.

[2] Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

Born in 1937 in El Paso, Texas, Celia Alvarez Muñoz arrived at her career as an artist later in her life. She first worked as a fashion illustrator and then spent many years as an art teacher for elementary and middle schools. In the late 1970s, she decided to pursue her graduate education in art and enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas). She studied with conceptual artists Vernon Fisher and Al Souza and received her degree in 1979. Throughout the next decade, she produced a number of artist's books incorporating photography and text, always written in a mix of English and Spanish. Her first major project, the *Enlightenment Series*, comprised ten books, including accordion books, match-book style books, and loose pages stored in boxes or framed. In these early works, she incorporates elements of her own background as a Mexican American who grew up on the U.S.-Mexico border, using humorous personal stories to question assumptions about language and learning.

Throughout her career, language has been central to Muñoz's practice. She credits her family for instilling her interest in language, recalling the sharp and humorous poems her grandmother would write and the instructional stories she would tell. In her practice, she describes language as "one of the toys I love to play with."[3] Muñoz incorporates text in English and Spanish in her books, installations, and public art projects, combining the visual and the verbal to design interactions for the viewer. She writes witty anecdotes and evocative poems, and the scale of her work has gradually increased. Her books eventually led to large installations that combined text and images in similar ways, as these two

[3] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, "Postales: Celia Muñoz" in Al Harris and Phyllis Price, *Border Issues: Negotiations and Identity* (Arlington, TX: Center for Research in Contemporary Art, The University of Texas at Arlington, 1991), 17.

elements played across gallery walls and sculptures in arrangements that mimicked book pages. She titled one installation *Rompiendo la Liga/Breaking the Binding*, signaling her shift toward working on a larger scale.

Around 1990, she also began undertaking collaborative projects, collecting stories from locals for commissioned works and collaborating with students and artists on installations. As curator Annette DiMeo Carlozzi explains, "Muñoz pursued opportunities to study with local communities and help excavate their histories through original and first-hand research. Using her art to tell stories that had been forgotten or edited out of the mainstream narrative, she made meaningful connections between individual and collective aspirations and concerns. She describes her working process as 'community collaboration' and negotiates skillfully between her own poetic and artistic impulses and the responsibility to educate and advocate."[4] These community-centered projects influenced Muñoz's pursuit of public art projects, which require cooperation and adaptability. She also credits her background in commercial illustration as teaching her how to be flexible with her own artistic ideas, an essential skill in public art. While *El Río Habla* marks a shift in scale and site from her books and gallery installations, the project intertwines with crucial threads that run throughout her practice: the use of language and the focus on local contexts, histories, and places.

Throughout her body of work, Muñoz employs clever texts, poetry, images, and spaces to uncover hidden histories and challenge assumptions about structures like time

[4] Annette DiMeo Carlozzi, "Truth and Consequences," in *Celia Alvarez Muñoz: Stories Your Mother Never Told You,* ed. Patricia Healy, (Arlington, TX: The Gallery at UTA, 2002), 11.

and language. Her practice is characterized by her keen attention to the local place in which she is working, fulfilling the values and qualities of what Lippard calls "place-specificity." Lippard argues that place-specific art does not speak generally about place but is inherently connected to a particular place, rooted in local histories, communities, cultures, and lands. Place-specific art is accessible, situated beyond the typical confines of the art world, and exists as an addition to the built environment, even if it is temporary. As Lippard notes, place-specific art is public, but not all public art is place-specific. A place-specific artwork should engage those who inhabit or frequent that locale, prompting them to find new meanings in their place as the work reveals the place's layers, widths, and depths.[5] *The Lure of the Local* includes an illustration and brief description of Muñoz's 1996 exhibition *Herencia: Now What?* at the Roswell Museum and Art Center in Roswell, New Mexico. This exhibition resulted from collaborative projects with the Latino community in the city, and Lippard's inclusion of it in *The Lure of the Local* demonstrates that she recognized the place-specific motives of Muñoz's work.[6] Throughout this thesis, I refer to Lippard's notion of place-specificity, as this framework illuminates Muñoz's approach to place throughout her practice and especially within her public art. I argue that Muñoz recognizes the importance of engaging the specificity of place in *El Río Habla*, and that she also extends this approach to her broader artistic production. Throughout her public art projects, installations, and artist's books, Muñoz maintains a concentration on place that reveals personal stories and underrecognized histories.

[5] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 264-265.
[6] See Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 24-25.

This thesis focuses on Muñoz's place-specific practice primarily through *El Río Habla*, beginning with a close examination of the work. First, I explore the work through a phenomenological approach, centering the experiences of looking, reading, listening, and moving, while also offering interpretations of the poem, the central feature of the project. Next, to illuminate how Muñoz engages language, history, time, place, and land in *El Río Habla*, I consider three additional works from a variety of genres: another public art project in Texas, the Downtown Garland Station; a museum installation, *Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground*; and an artist's book, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*. I bring these projects into conversation with *El Río Habla* to reveal the primary concerns of her practice and establish place-specificity as a central characteristic of her body of work. Situating *El Río Habla* within Muñoz's broader practice, I demonstrate that her work in public art, though rarely the subject of scholarship, is equally critical to understanding her practice as the artist's books, photography, and installations for which she is known. Finally, I return to *El Río Habla* to consider how this project delves into the layers of San Antonio, unearthing the stories that the río contains.

El Río Habla

The Portal San Fernando and *El Río Habla* comprise the Historic Civic Center River Link Project, which was initiated by the city of San Antonio to connect the Main Plaza at street level to the River Walk sixteen feet below, replacing a parking lot that previously occupied the site. Lake Flato Architects, a San Antonio-based firm, were selected to design the park. In 2000, Felix Padrón, who was the director of San Antonio's public art program at the time, invited Muñoz to an artist competition to produce a public artwork for the park.[7] Muñoz had previously worked with Padrón on a commission for the Henry B. González Convention Center, for which she provided design concepts and collaborated with graphic artists to conceive the center's carpeting. The selection committee for the Historic Civic Center River Link Project included the architects from Lake Flato and San Antonio city officials.

During her presentation for the competition, Muñoz gave the committee members a book she had compiled with images that had inspired her conceptualization of *El Río Habla*: photographs of archaeological digs, fossils, petroglyphs, and gilded objects, sourced from National Geographic and other magazines. The format of her proposal echoed her earlier book projects and reflected the centrality of the written word within her practice. Giving voice to the river, she recited the poem she had written for the project. The six

[7] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019. My information regarding the commission, conceptualization, and production of *El Río Habla* was primarily obtained from the artist.

stanzas describing various chapters of the river's story would eventually comprise the six landings of *El Río Habla*. By the end of the competition day, Muñoz had already been informed that her project had been selected as the winner. Her proposal demonstrated her focus on the site of the potential public artwork. Rather than designing an object that could be simply be placed within the park, she conceived a work that would be inherently connected to the site of the San Antonio River.

When Muñoz visited the site while developing her proposal for the River Link Project, the parking lot had already been demolished, transformed into a deep pit in preparation for the park's eventual construction.[8] The ditch reminded her of archaeological excavation sites, and she began to envision her project as a descent into the river. While conceiving her proposal, Muñoz also visited a lake near her home in Arlington, Texas and studied the ebb and flow of the water at its edge, observing the detritus that the water left behind on the banks after it receded. That residue, she realized, is history. Imagining the park as an archaeological dig, Muñoz thought of her project as a journey through San Antonio's history through the river and the objects that could possibly be found within it: fossils, shells, arrowheads, and other artifacts left behind by humans and animals.[9]

As she contemplated the ancient history of the river, before any humans inhabited the area, Muñoz decided that she wanted to explore how the river could speak for itself. Rather than recounting the river's history through the perspectives of humans, Muñoz decided to give the river a voice and allow it to tell its own story. She wrote a poem,

[8] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.
[9] Ibid.

narrated in first person from the perspective of the river. This poem is the central element of *El Río Habla*:

> Like life, *como la vida*
> I have made adjustments
> bending here and there
> *continuamente*
>
> I ran free, like the first
> human that walked me
> *Yanawana* was my name
> peaceful waters?
>
> I was tamed, *río amanzado*
> to yield, to feed, to foster
> *me nombraron San Antonio*
> who finds the lost
>
> I gave mills
> *comercio, industria*
> and invited *imigrantes*
> *de a montón*
>
> I put people to work
> during the hardest of times
> *la depresión, la guerra*
> *mano a mano*
>
> I continue to change
> open to this new *milenio*
> but how will you care for me now
> *viejo y seco?*

Muñoz describes the six stanzas of the poem as "chapters" of the river's story, with each one corresponding to one of the six "landings" or sections of the work.[10] Committed to the

[10] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.

page as above, the poem has a chronology that does not exist in *El Río Habla*. While each stanza reflects on a different time period, the arrangement of the six sections in the park allows for multiple routes through the river's story. The park has four entrances or exits, disrupting chronological progression and enabling viewers to enter the narrative at multiple points. We could enter directly from the Main Plaza and first encounter the Spanish colonial period, or from the stairs off Commerce Street, where we would find the section invoking Yanawana. From the accessible entrance on Market Street, we would meet the river's latest chapter ("in this new *milenio*") first.

The Portal San Fernando is a liminal space, a small pocket park that connects two larger locations, the River Walk and the Main Plaza. The Portal is a space to pass through, perhaps to rest in before moving on to the next place. Three of the four points of access require the public to descend, either on stairs or ramps, into the park. When conceiving the project, Muñoz imagined this descent as a journey down into the river, like an archaeological excavation. She wanted to prompt visitors to pause along this journey and contemplate the space in which they found themselves. "To get a sense of history," Muñoz explains, "is a reward."[11] In creating this interaction between the public and *El Río Habla*, Muñoz leaves the space open for visitors to access the work in multiple ways. The open arrangement of the park and the disruption of chronological sequence allows the public to navigate through and across the work, encountering different periods of San Antonio's history in a fluid, rather than linear, timeline.

[11] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.

When I first visited *El Río Habla* on a humid August day, I descended into the park from the staircase at the Main Plaza and encountered the third landing. My experience of the work started where many narratives of San Antonio begin: Spanish colonization. Walking around the park, I quickly learned that *El Río Habla* communicated a story that extended long before and after this historical period. At the other landings, I encountered Yanawana and the time before humans walked these shores, then at the southern edge of the park, I found poems that evoked the Great Depression and the future of the river.

As Muñoz's story of the river refuses strict chronology, so too does my analysis of *El Río Habla*. This poetic public artwork prompts a reconsideration of how San Antonio's history has been constructed and how it is told. What if the Alamo and the Texas Revolution were excluded? What if the HemisFair of 1968 and the city's recent economic growth were omitted, while the economic struggles of the early twentieth century were highlighted? What if plans for the city's future centered natural resources like the river rather than urban development and expansion? What if the stories began not with San Antonio, but with Yanawana, or even earlier? Muñoz encourages us to contemplate the countless stories that a place, like the San Antonio River, can contain. My study of *El Río Habla* concentrates on these stories that Muñoz reveals through the poem, objects, and water that compose the work, focusing on the experiences of viewing, reading, hearing, and moving. For the sake of clarity, my analysis will refer to the sequence of the poem, with the first stanza corresponding to the first landing and so forth, while following a meandering, non-chronological path through the "chapters" of the poem. Prompted by my

discussions with the artist, I use "chapter" interchangeably with "landing" to refer to the six sections of the work.

"I ran free, like the first / human that walked me," the río proclaims in the poem at the second landing, situated near a narrow staircase that connects the park to Commerce Street (Fig. 2). A fountain flows down a vertical panel next to the text, and two large rectangular blocks of limestone form an L-shaped seat, creating a small nook where visitors can rest and contemplate the poem. Arrow heads are embedded in the concrete, a reminder of the indigenous peoples who first dwelled in these lands (Fig. 3). Plants native to this region of Texas, including a large maguey, surround this nook, producing a harmonious balance between the rectangular limestone and the curving green flora.

"Yanawana was my name," the río declares, referencing the original name bestowed on this area by the Payaya people, the first known inhabitants of the region. Prior to Spanish settlement, three bands of Payayas, who were Coahuiltecan hunter-gatherers, lived in the area now known as San Antonio.[12] Muñoz's poem suggests that these early inhabitants and the river enjoyed liberty of movement throughout their coexistence. The Payaya wandered this region, following sources of water and food. Yanawana may have been the name for their village or for the river. Its exact translation is unknown; it may mean "peaceful waters," "water spirit," or "spirit of the water."[13] Muñoz translates

[12] On the Payaya, see David La Vere, *The Texas Indians* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); William C. Foster, *Historic Native Peoples of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); T.N. Campbell, *The Payaya Indians of Southern Texas* (San Antonio: Southern Texas Archaeological Association, 1975); and Charles R. Porter Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).

[13] Marleen Villanueva, "Yana wana is Life: Decolonizing Our Connection with Mother Earth through Memory and Reflection," (Master's Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 1.

Yanawana as "peaceful waters" in her poem, but adds a question mark after the phrase, one of only two punctuation points in the whole poem. Perhaps Muñoz is referring to the ambiguity of the translation or suggesting that the river has not always been peaceful, subtly acknowledging the river's history of flooding.[14]

The first landing is situated several paces away from the second, close to the northern entrance to the park that links it to the river walk. This section is more enclosed than the other landings, as the fountain feature and text panel recede into the limestone and away from the path. It originally included a limestone slab as a roof over the fountain feature, creating a shaded area reminiscent of a cave, though this part has since been removed. An L-shaped seat, similar to the one in the second landing, is now partially collapsed. The panel bearing Muñoz's poem is situated several feet off the ground, close to eye level (Fig. 4). On the ground, fossils, seashells, and rocks are embedded in the pavement, natural artifacts that hint at the river's life before humans inhabited the region (Fig. 5, Fig. 6).

The poem in the first landing is more abstract than the others. It does not explicitly refer to a specific period of the river's history but rather suggests the river's endurance over time: the river has always been there and still continues to flow. It is "Like life, *como la vida*," and adapts to the changes that surround and impact it. In this first chapter of the poem, the Spanish phrase directly echoes the English phrase immediately preceding it; in the other stanzas, the different languages do not repeat phrases, but trade off, balancing the

[14] Lewis Fisher covers the San Antonio River's history of flooding and the city's flood-prevention initiatives in his study of the River Walk. See Lewis Fisher, *River Walk: The Epic Story of San Antonio's River* (San Antonio: Maverick Publishing Company, 2007).

poem between the languages. As the phrases "Life life, *como la vida*" mirror each other, they evoke the reflection of the river's waters, which in turn suggests the river's ability to reflect the city back to itself. Comparing the river to life, Muñoz emphasizes the river's role as a powerful natural resource which has always been essential to life in the region.

The fifth landing similarly underscores the river's vital role in supporting life in San Antonio. Walking south along the river from the first landing, one encounters the fifth landing, where four staggered rows of limestone provide seating similar to an amphitheater (Fig. 7). The text panel is situated against a limestone wall that ascends about ten feet above the river level, connecting the southern edge of the park to street level (Fig. 8). In the poem, Muñoz again emphasizes the life-giving potential of the river but describes it in more active terms. The river recalls its role during the Great Depression and World War II: "I put people to work / during the hardest of times / *la depresión, la guerra* / *mano a mano*." Throughout the economic hardships of this era, the river provided jobs to San Antonio citizens. As Lewis Fisher explains in his history of the River Walk, its initial construction was overseen and funded by the Works Progress Administration in projects that provided jobs to nearly a thousand unemployed workers.[15]

A manhole cover designed by Muñoz is set within the concrete ground and echoes the poem's fifth stanza (Fig. 9). The cover features the shape of a gear, which is inscribed with the words of the fifth stanza. The gear encircles the central image of a fist clutching a wrench, reminiscent of triumphant or defiant raised fists of mid-twentieth century protest

[15] Fisher, *River Walk*, 94-107.

movements such as labor union strikes. As we shall see, Muñoz honored labor union organizers in her earlier project *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, an artist's book she produced for the Los Angeles organization The Power of Place. The fist also nods to the hands of countless citizens that have labored to build the city, including those that built the park.

While the river provides a site of labor for those in need in the fifth landing, in the fourth, the people employ the river towards their own economic ends. The fourth landing, slightly tucked away from the others along the ramp that connects to Market Street, centers the growth of San Antonio in the late nineteenth century (Fig. 10). "I gave mills," the river states, "*comercio, industria*." The fountain feature in this landing includes a water mill, hearkening to the mills and factories that were built along the river in the late 1800s.[16] This period also saw the expansion of the railroad, which first entered San Antonio in 1877, allowing for easier and faster transportation of people and goods.[17] The river "invited *imigrantes* / *de a montón*." Muñoz refers to the European immigrants, particularly Germans, who relocated to San Antonio during this time, while the informal Spanish phrase translates to "a lot" or "a heap." The city's population steadily increased during the latter decades of the century, reaching 53,321 by 1900, making San Antonio the largest city in Texas.[18] In the fourth and fifth chapters, Muñoz illuminates the supportive relationship between the city and the river. The citizens of San Antonio harnessed the river's energy to

[16] This fountain feature has since been removed.
[17] Charles R. Porter Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 105.
[18] Porter, *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*, 117.

support industry, then the river provided jobs to the city's workers during economic hardship. As Muñoz explains, "The people put the river to work, then the river put the people to work."[19]

The third landing is situated near the entrance to the park from the Main Plaza. A limestone staircase with trough-like fountains connects the two sites, and the poem is inscribed on a text panel near the end of the stairs, facing the park's central open space. With the San Fernando Cathedral looming behind it, this landing recounts the arrival of the Spanish and their eventual foundation of the city of San Antonio (Fig. 11). "I was tamed, *río amanzado* / to yield, to feed, to foster / *me nombraron San Antonio* / who finds the lost." When a Spanish expedition led by Domingo Terán de los Rios arrived in Yanawana on June 13, 1691, Father Damian Massanet named the river San Antonio because it was the feast day of Saint Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of lost things. Perhaps Muñoz invokes Saint Anthony to find the artifacts left on the river's banks and beds, to unearth the hidden histories of the city.

The view of the colonial era cathedral from this landing provides an ambivalent continuity with the third chapter: the cathedral appears to rise up from this landing, but it also symbolically casts a shadow. Embedded in the ground in front of the text panel, a cross, a rosary, a key, and a metal spur serve as reminders of the Spanish efforts to convert the native populations to Catholicism and the violence of colonization (Fig. 12).

[19] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.

The poem reveals a similar tension regarding this period of San Antonio's history. The Spanish colonists "tamed" the river "to yield, to feed, to foster." Muñoz refers to the acequias, the irrigation system that the Spanish quickly constructed when they first settled in the region. The accessibility of water from the rivers and springs was essential to the establishment of the Spanish missions throughout the area, where the semiarid climate was subject to regular droughts. As Charles R. Porter Jr. explains, "Of all the reasons for establishing these communities, the abundance of water was primary. Distribution of the water via acequias sowed the first seed of sustainable life for the settlement."[20] Under direction of the Spanish friars, the Indigenous Coahuiltecans in the missions provided most of the labor, sometimes by force and always under guard, to build the acequias.[21] Remnants of the acequias are still visible throughout San Antonio, and one, the Espada Acequia, is still functional. Muñoz's use of "yield" in the third stanza lends ambivalence to the poem: combined with "feed" and "foster," the word indicates the production that the river enabled, but it also implies submission. Through their settlement and establishment of the acequias, the Spanish asserted their control over the river, limiting the boundless freedom that these waters once enjoyed.

The sixth landing is located along the accessible path that connects the park to Market Street. Situated at street level, this landing is slightly isolated from the others (Fig. 13). While the other five chapters focus on San Antonio's history, the sixth considers the city's present and future. In the poem, the river expresses its continued resilience and

[20] Porter, *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*, 27.
[21] Ibid, 33.

adaptability: “I continue to change / open to this new *milenio*.” Muñoz shifts the focus from San Antonio’s history to the period in which she produced *El Río Habla*: the beginning of the twenty-first century and a new millennium. This landing features two drinking fountains, situated on the narrow ends of a long limestone trough on which the poem’s sixth stanza is inscribed. Salamanders, reminiscent of the Texas blind salamanders that are native to the Edwards Aquifer and the surrounding region, are carved along the top ridge of the trough (Fig. 14). A stone bench directly faces the fountain, creating another restful area for visitors to the park. Between the fountain and bench, small metal milagros, mostly representing hands, are embedded into the concrete pathway (Fig. 15). Like the worker’s fist on the manhole cover, the hands of these milagros gesture to the manual labor that has built and continues to build and sustain San Antonio. The milagros also symbolize requests for prayers and healing or gratitude for answered prayers. Here, the milagros express thanks to the river for its life-sustaining force, and they also pray for the river’s healing.

Providing water for public consumption, the drinking fountains remind us that the San Antonio River still supports life in the city, both for its citizens and its visitors. In the poem, however, the river begs the public to care for it: “but how will you care for me now / *viejo y seco?*” Now old and dry, the river needs the support of the city for its future preservation. Muñoz underscores that there must be give and take—a balance—between natural resources and those who use them.

As this landing connects the park to the street, it functions as both an entrance and exit; it could be the first or last landing which visitors encounter. As an entrance, it invites the public in, offering drinking water for thirsty passersby. Though isolated from the

context of the other landings and the rest of the poem, the sixth stanza is still clearly about the San Antonio River, demonstrated by the line "*viejo y seco*," and beckons people to descend into and explore the park. As an exit, it prompts visitors to consider how the people of San Antonio—both residents and visitors—could help preserve the river as they move away from its banks and back to the city's streets.

By concentrating on the city's present and future, the sixth chapter unites the stories of San Antonio's past conveyed in the previous five chapters with the contemporary moment. Muñoz recognizes the San Antonio River as a layered place that simultaneously contains countless moments in time. In *The Lure of the Local,* Lippard describes place as "latitudinal and longitudinal…. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there."[22] By unearthing overlooked stories from the past, *El Río Habla* illuminates the depth and width of a place that Lippard discusses. By bringing past, present, and future together, the work reveals how the river links these different moments in time.

The open, anti-chronological narrative structure of *El Río Habla* suggests that the past and history are not static or distant but are fluid and still palpable in the present. Muñoz gathers moments from the city's past, present, and future into one space, a non-hierarchical arrangement that centers the continually running water of the river. The structure of the six landings allows us to jump between different chapters of the river's story, rather than

[22] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 7.

following a linear timeline towards past or present. This refusal of chronology also implies that time does not have to be conceived of as linear and progressive, but perhaps can be considered as moving in a cyclical, circular, or fluid way.

As a continually flowing body of water, the river is the perfect place to explore the dynamic movement of time and to unearth obscured histories. The water is always moving and changing, the volume fluctuates, and the path sometimes shifts, but the river is a constant presence. In *El Río Habla*, Muñoz maintains that the San Antonio River is the central place in the city—not the Alamo or the San Fernando Cathedral or the Tower of the Americas or even the River Walk, but the river itself. The río is "like life, *como la vida*." The river was, is, and will be an essential source for life in San Antonio. "But how will you care for me now / *viejo y seco?*" the river asks. Muñoz reminds us that it must not be taken for granted: we must care for the river as it has cared for us. In the sixth chapter, "The river leaves the responsibility back with the people," Muñoz explains.[23] In *El Río Habla*, visitors to the park can pause, reflect, and learn about the city's underrecognized histories as they move between different moments in time, but they are also ultimately urged to make their own contributions to this place by caring for the river.

[23] Celia Alvarez Muñoz and Cary Cordova, Oral history interview with Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Arlington, TX, February 7, 8, and 28, 2004 (Washington, DC: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 46.

The Power of Place

Muñoz's practice has continually centered the communities and places in which she works. In her photography, book projects, installations, and public art works, she engages the histories, cultures, environments, communities, and personal memories surrounding her, revealing stories that are obscured in dominant narratives. Examining a selection of her other projects illuminates how Muñoz engages place, land, language, time, and history in *El Río Habla*. Specifically, I examine a public art project in Garland, Texas completed in 2002 in which Muñoz harnesses poetry to contemplate the movement of time while incorporating symbols of the local environment. In a museum exhibition a decade earlier, in 1991, she combines personal narrative, historical references, and minimalist and conceptual art tendencies to create a layered installation that challenges linear, static notions of time and centers the place where she was raised. An artist book from the same year honors the unacknowledged history of labor union organizers who gathered in a Los Angeles auditorium. Throughout these projects, Muñoz maintains a concentration on the specificity of place.

In the Dallas suburb of Garland, Muñoz collaborated with the Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) Station Art and Design Program to design the outdoor light rail station in downtown. Opened in 2002, a year after the River Link Project was completed in San Antonio, the station was part of DART's extension of light rail service into the suburbs in the early 2000s. Muñoz designed four limestone columns situated at one entrance and developed motifs that appear throughout the station's seating, walls, paving, and structures

(Fig. 16). A clock tower, located at the entrance opposite the columns, echoes those that previously decorated train stations and town squares at the turn of the twentieth century (Fig. 17).

The rectangular columns bear poetic texts that wrap around each side and invoke time, space, and silence, as the noises of the approaching and departing trains regularly permeate the station. While the poem in *El Río Habla* appears in discrete stanzas on individual limestone panels, these short poetic lines meander across the four sides of each column, surrounded by spiral and wave designs, creating a disorienting reading experience. Muñoz's language here—in English only, not bilingual—is abstract and vague, weaving simple but evocative words into brief lines of texts. Two of the poems consider the nature and passage of time, recalling the concepts of history and time, as well as the river's constant movement, in *El Río Habla*. Around one column, the text references "The Paradox of Time" by English poet Austin Dobson: "Time goes? / No / time stays / we go" (Fig. 18). The poem hints at the artificial construction of time, as it states that "we go" while time remains. The station's clock tower, besides functioning practically as a reference for commuters awaiting the next train, functions conceptually to emphasize Muñoz's ruminations on the nature of time. We rely on the twenty-four-hour clock system daily, but, as the poem suggests, this structure is not the only way to measure and understand time. This questioning of time's construction and the nature of its movement corresponds to Muñoz's rejection of chronology in *El Río Habla*.

The poem on another column proposes that time, like the río in San Antonio, can speak: "Time / is a talker / it tells / everything." Muñoz questions time's movement, hinting

that it does not necessarily move in a linear fashion, and declares that time can tell us "everything." Together, the two poems evoke the importance of memory and storytelling. Time, unlike history, can tell everything. Time contains past, present, and future together, and it holds all stories, even those that are obscured or ignored within mainstream narratives. As in *El Río Habla*, time is conceived of as open and expansive. Muñoz's suggestion of the ability to speak in both works can also be read as an empowering statement, reminding us of our own capacity to speak.

Both public artworks also prompt us to listen. In San Antonio, the sound of running water from the fountains and river fills the park, as we both hear and read what the river is saying. In Garland, two columns contain poetic text evoking silence. The words "Space / has always / reduced me / to silence" wrap around one column. "-Listen- / now there's / nothing but / complete silence" are carved into another. These poems prompt us to not just read Muñoz's words but to also listen to the sounds around us. The outdoor station is often quiet, but far from silent: the noises of arriving and departing trains, announcements, and nearby car traffic regularly permeate the space. By alluding to silence, Muñoz prompts the public to enjoy a moment of quiet contemplation while awaiting their train.

The arrangement of the texts on the columns produces a disorienting reading experience. When I first saw the station, I read the words individually and horizontally across each column, unsure of the correct way to read them or if they even formed complete sentences. After several minutes of looking and reading, I realized that the words on each separate column formed discrete phrases. Yet the text does not have to be read in these complete sentences, as the short words are simple yet evocative enough to produce

meanings in various arrangements. This keeps the work accessible and open to many associations and interpretations; there is no single correct way to encounter this work. Muñoz invites us to enter and explore it however we choose, as she does in *El Río Habla*. These generous invitations characterize her practice, while she simultaneously prompts the viewer to contribute as well. At both sites, the texts meditate on history and time, and the sounds indicate movement, hinting at the continual movement of time. While their publics differ—downtown tourists in San Antonio and suburban commuters in Garland—both projects ask the viewers to consider the passage of time while alluding to local histories that are held within land and city.

In addition to conceiving the columns and clock tower, Muñoz designed motifs inspired by the local landscape that appear throughout the station. Reeds, vines, and other plants are represented in metal and limestone, decorating the seating and walls and illustrating the flora that surrounds water in this region (Fig. 19). Weaving these natural symbols throughout the station, Muñoz incorporates the specificity of the location in which her project is situated, bringing the land into the work itself.

Muñoz's focus on the local context goes beyond references to the nearby flora as she also recognizes the land's early histories and peoples. Waves and spirals are carved into the four limestone columns, swirling around the text, and appear in the paving and decoration throughout the station (Fig. 20). These symbols refer to the Native American watering holes that were once present in the area, which was originally inhabited by the Wichita people. This allusion to the Indigenous history of the area can be read as a subtle land acknowledgement. Though Muñoz does not directly name the Wichita, her

incorporation of the wave symbols nods to the original inhabitants of what is now known as Garland.

Muñoz's acknowledgement of Indigenous land is more explicit in *El Río Habla* as she directly invokes Yanawana in the second landing, reminding us of the local history before European colonization, before the land became San Antonio. In both sites, water prompts these recognitions. In San Antonio, the río tells us the first name of this place, Yanawana, bestowed upon it by the Payaya people. In Garland, waves and spirals hint at the watering holes used by the Wichita. Through these local waters, Muñoz recognizes the early histories of these lands and nods to them in both works, rather than focusing on more mainstream histories that begin with colonization or merely responding to the surrounding architecture of the sites.

Muñoz also references Native American cultures in her 1991 exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), *Concentrations 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground*, part of a series of exhibitions that supported new projects by contemporary artists. For her project, Muñoz incorporated wall drawings, text, and sculpture and extended her installation to the gallery windows and outside, into the museum's garden. The exhibition came at a time of expansion for Muñoz's career—her work was also included in the 1991 Whitney Biennial and she soon began receiving more solo exhibitions—and her practice, as she undertook larger installations. As Roberto Tejada explains in his insightful chapter on *Abriendo Tierra* in his 2009 monograph on the artist, the exhibition is layered and complex, incorporating references to ancient Native American

cultures, El Paso at the turn of the twentieth century, and minimalist art.[24] An examination of the installation can also illuminate some of the persistent concerns within Muñoz's practice that are also apparent in *El Río Habla*, in particular time, land, water, and memory.

Inside the museum, Muñoz created wall drawings on two opposite walls (Fig. 21). One wall was painted pink and the other was yellow, both colors reminiscent of Mexican vernacular architecture and Luis Barragán's modernist architecture. The drawings recall ancient Native American pictographs, rock carvings, and cave paintings found in the Southwestern U.S., as human figures, birds, scorpions, snakes, anthropomorphic shapes, bows and arrows, and other objects dance across the bright surfaces (Fig. 22). As Tejada notes, these drawings contrast sharply with a nearby work from the museum's collection on permanent display: Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #398*, 1983.[25]

Muñoz's installation continued to the gallery's floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over the museum's garden, connecting the interior and exterior spaces. Muñoz installed two columns of white vinyl text onto the windows' glass surfaces, connecting the interior and exterior sections of her project (Fig. 23). Incorporating personal history, Muñoz's text recounts the story of her grandparents' migration, describing their experience of arriving in El Paso at the end of their long journey from Jalisco at the end of the nineteenth century. As in *El Río Habla*, the text is in both English and Spanish: "At the edge of the river crossing the sign read CERRADO, CLOSED." The text explains that when they reached

[24] See Roberto Tejada, "Geography" in *Celia Alvarez Muñoz* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2009), 7-28.
[25] Tejada, *Celia Alvarez Muñoz*, 20.

Texas, the crossing was closed, forcing them to travel further to a higher point, where "the city below became a multitude of glistening lights." When the sky outside the galleries was dark, the lights from buildings in downtown Dallas, visible through the windows, echoed the El Paso lights from a century earlier. As Muñoz explains, the windows connect the sections of her project. "Just as a writer may break the form of a book, I broke the site of the installation, outside and in, and used the [museum's] glass wall as a site of transition."[26]

Outside the galleries, Muñoz constructed a sculpture over the center of a rectangular reflecting pool in the garden (Fig. 24). The sculpture is composed of narrow wooden beams, with two emerging from the pool, and metal joints that form a bare, octagonal structure that resembles a small hut. Two red neon light tubes hang horizontally from the center, forming an X shape that hovers between the sculpture's "roof" and the water. The sculpture and surrounding downtown buildings converge in their reflections in the pool. Muñoz's simple, hut-like structure also stands near a large steel sculpture by Ellsworth Kelly on permanent display by the pool.

In her essay for the exhibition's brochure, DMA curator Joan Davidow explains that while conceiving the installation, Muñoz researched the ancient Hohokam and Mogollon cultures, who inhabited what is now the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico.[27] Muñoz designed the outdoor sculpture based on Mogollon "pithouses," circular dwellings in which the floor was between one and five feet below ground level. Davidow

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[26] Quoted in Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Alterities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 211.
[27] Joan Davidow, *Concentrations 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1991), 4.

argues that the sculpture allows Muñoz to "mark her own spiritual place" and "connect herself with her Texas border roots."[28] Beyond these personal associations, the sculpture's reference to Mogollon dwellings also acknowledges the original inhabitants of the region around El Paso. While the Indigenous cultures referenced in the installation are not specific to the area in which the work was displayed (for the greater Dallas area, this would be the Wichita and Comanche), this earlier project forms a foundation for Muñoz's acknowledgement of Indigenous lands in her later public art works. Her references in *Abriendo Tierra* are more visual and direct, while *El Río Habla* and the Downtown Garland Station carry more subtle allusions that are specific to the histories of the sites.

Across these three projects, Muñoz incorporates language, time, place, and water. Language, central to her entire practice, manifests in a narrative recounting personal family history across a gallery window; in a six-stanza poem written from the perspective of a river, carved into limestone panels; and in brief, abstract poetic lines that creep their way around four columns. Except in Garland, the text is bilingual, shifting back and forth between English and Spanish, the two languages Muñoz grew up speaking. Muñoz's bilingualism, which allows her to think between and across two languages, has shaped her practice. As Lippard explains when writing about Muñoz in 1996, "Her ability to think in two languages and their permutations has helped her to hurdle cultural and social barriers, move easily across time and space."[29] Muñoz has also credited her bilingualism as

[28] Davidow, *Concentrations 26,* 3-4.
[29] Lucy R. Lippard and Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *Celia Alvarez Muñoz: Herencia: Now What?* (Roswell, NM: Roswell Museum and Art Center, 1996), 3.

foundational to her artistic approach and directly acknowledged the impact of growing up Mexican American on the border between those two countries. She has stressed that "the issues of growing up in a border city and being exposed to two languages cannot be discounted. My formative years were in Spanish. The schooling was mostly in English. So thinking thus developed in both… creating a third or more."[30]

In Garland, Muñoz muses on the nature and movement of time in her poems, and in San Antonio, the open-ended, fluid arrangement of her poem produces an anti-chronological space to explore the city's obscured stories. *Abriendo Tierra* may illuminate the role of time in *El Río Habla*, as this 1991 exhibition provides an earlier example of how Muñoz traverses, reimagines, and occasionally collapses time. The installation moves between El Paso at the end of the nineteenth century, minimalist and conceptual art in the U.S. in the twentieth century, and imagery referencing ancient Native American cultures. Rather than presenting these instances chronologically, Muñoz presents them simultaneously, as if they all belong within the same time frame and space. This is most obvious in the text on the gallery's windows, which speaks of El Paso's earlier skyline but reveals that of contemporary Dallas, and in the outdoor sculpture, which joins references to Mogollon structures with minimalist art. Tejada describes the installation as a "palimpsest of time and place," where "fin de siècle El Paso was overlaid by 1990s Dallas by way of late-twentieth-century modernism and Pueblo Indian picture making anterior to colonization." He continues, "The layering effects of history as defined by ethos and epoch

[30] Celia Alvarez Muñoz and Benito Huerta, "Curator's Interview with Celia Alvarez Muñoz," in *Celia Alvarez Muñoz: Stories Your Mother Never Told You,* ed. Patricia Healy (Arlington, TX: The Gallery at UTA, 2002), 15.

leave indelible traces of the past no matter how obscured or overwritten: absolute or undefined space in the 'expanded field' was replaced here by nonlinear locations that allowed the viewer to move between contradictory layers."[31] Muñoz's installation subverts the concept of linear time as well as progressive narratives of history. Instead, she creates a layered space where her allusions coexist simultaneously, where we can move fluidly between and through them.

Throughout her practice, Muñoz maintains a strong awareness of the context in which she is working. As Tejada demonstrates, in *Abriendo Tierra*, she playfully engages with artworks from the DMA's permanent collection that surround her installation. Her wall drawings provide a bright, dynamic foil to LeWitt's stark geometry. Her outdoor sculpture directly engages the museum's garden, as it is situated within the pool and mingles with the reflections in the water. Meanwhile, Ellsworth Kelly's steel sculpture looms at the pool's edge, static and heavy. Tejada also argues that by joining Native American and Mexican American references in an installation that alludes to minimalist and conceptual art, Muñoz prompts questions regarding the "persistent references to Native American cultural forms in minimalist projects and earthworks…. More than her minimalist peers, Alvarez Muñoz had direct knowledge of the American Southwest and Mexico's pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern cultures."[32]

While *Abriendo Tierra* was conceived for and displayed in Dallas, El Paso and its surrounding region are also central to the installation. Muñoz's text piece recounts her

[31] Tejada, *Celia Alvarez Muñoz*, 20.
[32] Ibid, 14.

grandparents' first glimpse of the city, while the Mogollon houses on which her sculpture is based would have existed in what is now southern New Mexico, western Texas, and northern Chihuahua. Additionally, Tejada argues that the reflecting pool in *Abriendo Tierra* functions as "a stand-in for the Rio Grande—Mexico's Río Bravo del Norte."[33] This symbolism strengthens the connection that Muñoz draws between 1990s Dallas and the Texas-Chihuahua border a century earlier. The pool also constitutes a visual mirroring, as the sculpture is reflected on the water's surface along with the surrounding architecture of downtown Dallas. Water, once again, forms a crucial component of the project.

In the same year she produced *Abriendo Tierra*, Muñoz discussed the significance of her hometown in an artist statement for a group exhibition at the University of Texas at Arlington titled *Border Issues: Negotiations and Identity*. She wrote,

> El Paso for me is still very pivotal. (But so is most every place I've been. I've gathered many points of reference as I go along.) It's very natural for us who come from a place that is a geographical border to look at borders as more than geography. I've very much felt the position of the marginal "man"—on the line between two cultures.[34]

Her perception of the limits of geography and borders and her ability to navigate two cultures echo her statement about the "third language" that can emerge from bilingualism. She has described her artworks as "narrative[s] of visual and verbal expression…. Through them I reveal my bilingual and bicultural heritage; a schizoid type of existence in the border

[33] Tejada, *Celia Alvarez Muñoz*, 20.
[34] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, "Postales: Celia Muñoz" in Al Harris and Phyllis Price, *Border Issues: Negotiations and Identity* (Arlington, TX: Center for Research in Contemporary Art, The University of Texas at Arlington, 1991), 17.

town of El Paso."[35] This does not necessarily mean that all of her works disclose personal stories—though she often incorporates personal narratives, including her grandparents' account of crossing the border in *Abriendo Tierra*—but rather that her bilingual, bicultural, border city perspective permeates her work.

Given that Muñoz herself frequently credits growing up in El Paso as formative to her artistic practice, the origin of her consistent attention to water can also be found there. Growing up near the Río Grande, where the river defines and divides two cities, two states, and two nations, Muñoz developed a keen awareness of the role of rivers in shaping life, history, culture, geography, and stories. In another poetic artist statement, Muñoz compares her practice to the Río Grande directly. She writes that,

> My work carries me, and my culture
> like the *Río Grande*.
> Bordering my birthplace, El Paso,
> it runs and gives passage to a boundless assortment of stories
> from both riverbanks in two languages.[36]

In Muñoz's hands, the reflecting pool at the DMA becomes the Río Grande as she recounts her ancestors' experience of crossing the border that is defined by that river. Recognizing the stories that water can contain, she carries this perspective beyond the Río Grande. In San Antonio and Garland, water—physically present in the former and symbolically referenced in the latter—evokes obscured histories of the lands on which the works are situated. Allowing the San Antonio River to speak for itself, Muñoz reminds us of the

[35] Quoted in Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 207.
[36] Quoted in Tejada, *Celia Alvarez Muñoz*, 5.

"boundless assortment of stories" that the river carries. The río speaks in both English and Spanish and remembers its first name, Yanawana, "spirit of the water."

By acknowledging the Native American lands upon which *El Río Habla* and the Downtown Garland Station are situated, Muñoz emphasizes the importance of engaging with the layered histories of the locations in which public art works are sited. When producing a public art project, Muñoz delves into the history, land, and community of the place. She does not merely design an object to be situated within a public space, in the common "plop art" tactic that pervades public art. Producing works that are deeply rooted in their particular places, Muñoz creates place-specific public art, which Cameron Cartiere describes as "public works created for and from specific locations."[37]

Regarding place-specificity, Lippard writes that, "For all the art that is *about* place, very little is *of* place—made by artists *within* their own places or *with* the people who live in the scrutinized place, connecting with the history and environment."[38] Since Muñoz has been based in Arlington for her entire artistic career, the Dallas/Fort Worth area *is* her space. She brings her local knowledge to the Garland Station, incorporating the land's history and attributes into her public art project there. Though not a public artwork, *Abriendo Tierra* is also about place and of place, as the installation concentrates on her family's memories of El Paso and references the region's underrecognized histories.

[37] Cameron Cartiere, "Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History," in *The Practice of Public Art*, ed. Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.
[38] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 263.

Finally, *El Río Habla* unearths neglected moments of San Antonio's history while centering the river as a crucial feature of the city's environment.

To further understand the place-specificity and public focus of Muñoz's practice, we can turn to her 1991 artist's book project *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*.[39] Dolores Hayden, an architectural historian at the University of California, Los Angeles, commissioned Muñoz to produce a work for The Power of Place, an organization that Hayden had founded. The Power of Place was an interdisciplinary initiative "dedicated to celebrating Los Angeles' multicultural history through historic preservation and public art,"[40] and included art projects, scholarship, walking tours, and conferences focused on nine sites throughout the city. Muñoz was recruited to contribute to the organization's Embassy Auditorium Project, which centered on the history of labor union and civil rights organizing in the 1930s and 1940s at the Embassy Hotel and Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles. Muñoz concentrated on three women activists who organized the garment and cannery workers in the city: Luisa Moreno, representative of United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) and co-founder of El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española (The Spanish Speaking People's Congress); Josefina Fierro de Bright, another co-founder of El Congreso; and Rose Pesotta, a Jewish organizer and leader of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), who helped establish union chapters throughout the U.S. Muñoz initially conceived of a public art project that would

[39] See Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran* (Arlington, TX: Enlightenment Press, 1991).
[40] Donna Graves and Nancy Stillger, "The Power of Place at the Embassy Auditorium" in Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, i.

represent these three women and would be installed in the Embassy's lobby, but the possibility of any long-term art installation had to be abandoned due to the building's structural instability.

Instead, Muñoz proposed to make a book, a format that had been central to her career throughout the previous decade. With funding from The Power of Place, Muñoz conceived, wrote, and designed the limited-edition book and oversaw its production. Like her previous artist's books and portfolios, she published *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran* under her own press, Enlightenment Press. The 44-page offset print book is contained in a semi-transparent corrugated plastic case that resembles an envelope. The cover bears a 1946 photograph of an ILGWU meeting at the Embassy Auditorium: the faces of countless garment workers, almost entirely women, look up at the camera on stage, connecting our contemporary gaze with theirs (Fig. 25). The end pages are decorated with a pattern of logos from various labor unions. The book has three ongoing narrative threads that flow horizontally across the pages: first, a historical account at the top; second, a visual narrative in the middle; and third, a personal story at the bottom. Throughout the book, the full text is written in both English and Spanish.

In the first storyline, Muñoz imagines the stories that the walls of the Embassy building would tell us, if they could speak. "If walls could speak, these walls would tell / in sounds of human voices, music and machines / of the early tremors of the City of Angels" (Fig. 26).[41] The book opens with this sentence prompting us to listen as we read, so that

[41] Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 1-3.

we can hear "the chatter of conventional camaraderies / and the roar of the proletariat in progressive protest / snapping the spine of the nation in place."[42] Writing in a poetic tone, Muñoz narrates the history of labor union organizing at the Embassy Auditorium, recounting how Pesotta, Moreno, and Fierro de Bright rallied workers to strike and united Latinos through the Spanish Speaking People's Congress.

The second/middle narrative incorporates archival photographs of the Embassy, the organizers, and the workers, as well as images pulled from nineteenth century scrapbooks, earlier prints, and posters from the labor unions. A group of cherubs hover across one page, symbolizing the City of Angels. On another page, an illustration represents a peach-slicing machine that would have been used in a canning factory (Fig. 27). Photographs depict the interior of the Embassy Auditorium, meetings at the building, labor union strikes, and Moreno, Fierro de Bright, and Pesotta (Fig. 28). Short, witty poems and quotes from factory workers also appear throughout this middle section, adding more voices to the book.

In the third storyline, Muñoz writes in first person as she recalls her mother's experience of working in a garment factory in El Paso in the 1940s. She writes of the difficult conditions at the factory ("If the quota was not met many would skip breaks for days"[43]), but also of the community, the second family that her mother found with her coworkers. "Mom often worked odd hours and I hardly saw her," she writes, connecting her personal experience and family history to the struggles of the factory workers who

[42] Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 6-8.
[43] Ibid, 15.

gathered at the Embassy Auditorium to organize for better working conditions.[44] Through this, she also links Los Angeles and El Paso; the two places become layers within the same story.

The layered structure of the three sections allows readers to approach the book in multiple ways. The reader could start by reading all the lines at the top from beginning to end, then continue with the second section, then the third. They could read it like a typical book, top to bottom, left to right. They could read across the two-page spread, going through each section, then moving on to the next two-page spread. They could read it only in English or Spanish, or the bilingual reader could read it in both. This structure leaves *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran* open to various paths of engagement. Muñoz carries this openness to her public art projects a decade later. In the Downtown Garland Station, the four columns generate a dynamic reading experience as the poems twist around each column. *El Río Habla* also has a similarly fluid design but is even more open, as it is not confined by the boundaries of a book. In each of these three projects, Muñoz stages the interaction, but she also creates multiple points of entry and exit and various paths of movement within the works. Readers, pedestrians, and commuters can access the works as they desire.

The action of speaking is central to both *El Río Habla* and *If Walls Could Speak*. Like the San Antonio River, the Embassy Auditorium speaks for itself. In both works, Muñoz prompts us to listen as we read her texts, revealing the sounds and stories that both

[44] Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 18.

places hold. The Embassy Auditorium holds the music of classical and jazz performances, the buzz of friendly conversations, and shouts of protesting workers. As we read her book, Muñoz encourages us to imagine how these sounds would fill the space. By the San Antonio River, we can actually hear the river itself as it flows, while the fountains in the park contribute to the sounds of running water. Tejada points out that the layered storylines in *If Walls Could Speak* also reflect the experience of reading and listening in public, where many voices, sounds, and sights surrounds us.[45]

If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran is foundational to Muñoz's public art projects, particularly *El Río Habla*. Muñoz herself refers to *If Walls Could Speak* as her "first step into public art."[46] While she initially conceived of a public art installation for The Power of Place, the book that she ultimately produced can also be seen as a public work of art. As an artist's book, the project circulated outside the boundaries of museums and galleries, allowing for potentially broader or different access to the work compared to conventional art objects. Copies of the book are held in university libraries across the country, as well as in the Los Angeles Public Library. We are not only free to handle the book, but we must in order to engage the work, which is an accessible art object. Though it was produced in a limited edition, the book still critically functions outside of typical art world boundaries. As Laura Pérez explains, "Muñoz's art-book and book-based installations of the 1990s, however, are instructive as examples of artwork that succeeds in democratizing the circulation of art, and in freeing it from the elitist aura of rarefied object

[45] Tejada, *Celia Alvarez* Muñoz, 58.
[46] Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, iii.

most meaningful to connoisseurs and investors."[47] In a similar vein, Asta M. Kuusinen recognizes that *If Walls Could Speak* was a crucial moment in Muñoz's practice. She writes that "the public art project that conceived this book was pivotal in the development of Alvarez Muñoz's artistic expression, not only because it instilled in her a lasting fascination with communal art outside the four walls of the museum and gallery spaces, but, more importantly, because the ideals and work processes that evolved during this collaborative project helped the artist to crystalize her ideas and channel her abilities, interests, and ambitions, which rapidly yielded her national and international recognition."[48] Muñoz's commitment to collaborative, community-focused work has enabled her to produce critical, place-specific public artworks.

Beyond the possibilities of different accessibility of the book format, *If Walls Could Speak* can be understood as a public artwork due to its attention to place and community. The project was rooted in a specific place, the Embassy Auditorium, and concentrated on a particular group, the labor union organizers. Muñoz's community-focused practice can be understood as a public art practice. Cameron Cartiere broadly defines public art as "art outside of museums and galleries" that must meet one of the following criteria:

1. in a place accessible or visible to the public: *in public*
2. concerned with or affecting the community or individuals: *public interest*
3. maintained for and used by the community or individuals: *public place*
4. paid for by the public: *publicly funded*[49]

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[47] Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 215.

[48] Asta M. Kuusinen, *Shooting from the Wild Zone: A Study of Chicana Art Photographers Laura Aguilar, Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Delilah Montoya, and Kathy Vargas* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2006), 237.

[49] Cartiere, "Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History," 15.

As a project that centered a specific community, *If Walls Could Speak* fits the "public interest" category of Cartiere's definition. It also corresponds to Lippard's generous definition of public art, which she describes as "accessible art of any species that cares about, challenges, involves, and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment."[50] Muñoz speaks generally of her intention to highlight the unique aspects of a community and reflect those features back to them, in order to "give back to the community."[51] *If Walls Could Speak* recognizes not just the principal organizers but all those who contributed and participated. She writes, "This little book is in honor of those mentioned / and the infinite not mentioned."[52]

This recognition of the countless workers who contribute to our communities and cities is characteristic of Muñoz's practice, as she often acknowledges and honors the anonymous and the marginal. Pérez describes *If Walls Could Speak* as a project that "ambitiously attempted to plumb the depths of the unseen, marking the traces of the socially and culturally ghostly, the historically ephemeral."[53] In *El Río Habla*, Muñoz follows a similar goal as she writes poetry from the river's perspective. Subverting San Antonio's famous monuments, she highlights a place and stories that are obscured by dominant and progressive narratives of the city's history. The río remembers the land before any human memory recorded it, and it reminds us of the hardship of the Great Depression. The river acknowledges the Indigenous people who first inhabited and named

[50] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 264.
[51] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.
[52] Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 18-19.
[53] Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 213.

the land. The milagros embedded in the ground in the sixth landing gesture to the countless hands that have built the city, while the river implores the public to care for it now and in the future. Regarding *If Walls Could Speak*, Pérez states that "The power of place also involves… showing what are important, life-sustaining (and thus, 'sacred') community centers to us today."[54] The San Antonio River is certainly such a vital and sacred place, as its waters have supported life around it for centuries.

[54] Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 150.

Public Poetics

Revealing the stories contained in the land, environment, or buildings, Muñoz's artworks can be described as place-specific. Lippard describes place-specific art as

> art that reveals new depths of a place to engage the viewer or inhabitant, rather than abstracting that place into generalizations that apply just as well to any other place. Place-specific art would have an organic connection to its locale and cannot be looked at primarily as an object outside of the viewer/inhabitant's life. It must take root outside of conventional venues and would not be accessible only to those in the know, enticed by publicity and fashion. It should become at least temporarily part of, or a criticism of, the built and/or daily environment, making places mean more to those who live or spend time there.[55]

This is precisely what Muñoz achieves in *El Río Habla*. As a place-specific work of public art, *El Río Habla* is accessible and organically rooted in its location, revealing the depths and widths of its place. By engaging communities and exploring the layers of place, Muñoz unearths obscured histories throughout her practice. She combines image, space, and language to compel us to look, read, listen, and move. Throughout her public art practice, she aims to reflect the unique aspects of a community back to them and to design interactions where viewers can pause, reflect, and learn about their places. These motives and characteristics of her practice are abundantly evident in *El Río Habla*.

In planning *El Río Habla*, Muñoz explains that she aimed to create a space where the public could stop and rest and contemplate.[56] The park and *El Río Habla*, products of

[55] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 263.
[56] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.

conversations and collaborations between Muñoz, architects and landscape designers, city officials, and community stakeholders, provide spaces for visitors to rest or slowly meander as they move between the Main Plaza, the River Walk, and the streets. Muñoz's niches, with their poetic stanzas, fountains, seats, and artifacts, prompt visitors to pause and contemplate where they are as they pass through the liminal space of the park. To extend the park outward to the surrounding streets, benches were installed along Commerce Street, giving pedestrians a place to rest even if they do not enter the park itself. This was prompted, Muñoz explains, by a desire "to give back to the locals," so that the project could serve local passersby in addition to the mostly tourist groups that visit the River Walk.[57]

El Río Habla critically intervenes in the commercial tourist center of the River Walk by focusing on the river itself as a life-sustaining place, rather than reflecting the profit-driven hotels, shops, and restaurants that pervade the area. As the park's initial purpose was to link the Main Plaza and River Walk, it can also be seen as a project related to urban development, but Muñoz's public artwork subverts this through her keen attention to the underrecognized histories of San Antonio and her centering of the river as the city's monumental force. A poem evoking the past is carved into stone, mirroring a standard feature of triumphant and memorial monuments, but the words do not simplistically glorify the most prominent events of San Antonio's history. Instead, the poem, which switches between English and Spanish, speaks of underrepresented stories from throughout history, even recognizing the time before any humans had settled in the region. The poem's

[57] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.

oscillation between English and Spanish reflects the bilingual reality of the city, whose population was nearly 58.66% Hispanic/Latino in 2000.[58] The alternating languages also remind us that San Antonio was once part of Mexico, and before that, New Spain, while the second landing also acknowledges that it was once called Yanawana.

Muñoz conceived of movement through the park as a "journey of discovery" and intended visitors to be rewarded with a sense of history.[59] Her project conveys histories of San Antonio that have been obscured by the dominant narratives that center and idealize Spanish colonization, the Alamo and the Texas Revolution, and modern urban development. "History with a capital H has often been described as a fiction written by the conquerors, yet there are other histories, often hidden, sometimes literally buried," Lippard writes in *The Lure of the Local*. "We study history as great waves that pass over the land and change how we use and think of it, but apart from an element of nostalgia, or longing, it tends to pass us by. It rarely seems to be our story. We forget that it goes right up to yesterday."[60] Muñoz does not forget this. In *El Río Habla*, she stages an open, meandering journey through San Antonio's history and brings us to its current moment, linking past, present, and future in a fluid timeline.

As the San Antonio River flows, its waters are constantly changing. The río carries stories from across time, and these stories mingle in the water. Muñoz reminds us that the river is simultaneously ancient and contemporary, as she creates a space where disparate

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[58] City of San Antonio Department of Planning & Community Development, "Demographic Distribution and Change, 2000 to 2010: Summary Report," March 2012.
[59] Celia Alvarez Muñoz, interview with the author, Arlington, TX, February 11, 2019.
[60] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 13.

moments in time are united. In *El Río Habla*, we can pause on our journey through the park and rest on the limestone seats as we listen to the river. Reading the poem's stanzas in whichever order we please, we encounter San Antonio's underrecognized histories. We can meander along the paths, examining the shells, tools, and milagros under our feet. As we make our way back to the street, we can get a drink of water, a reminder of the river's life-giving power. Ultimately, Muñoz reminds us that there must be a balance to this give and take. "Life life, *como la vida*," the río continues to change, "open to this new *milenio*," but now we must give back to it.

Figures

Figure 1: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, Portal San Fernando, Historic Civic Center River Link Project, San Antonio, Texas, 2000-01.

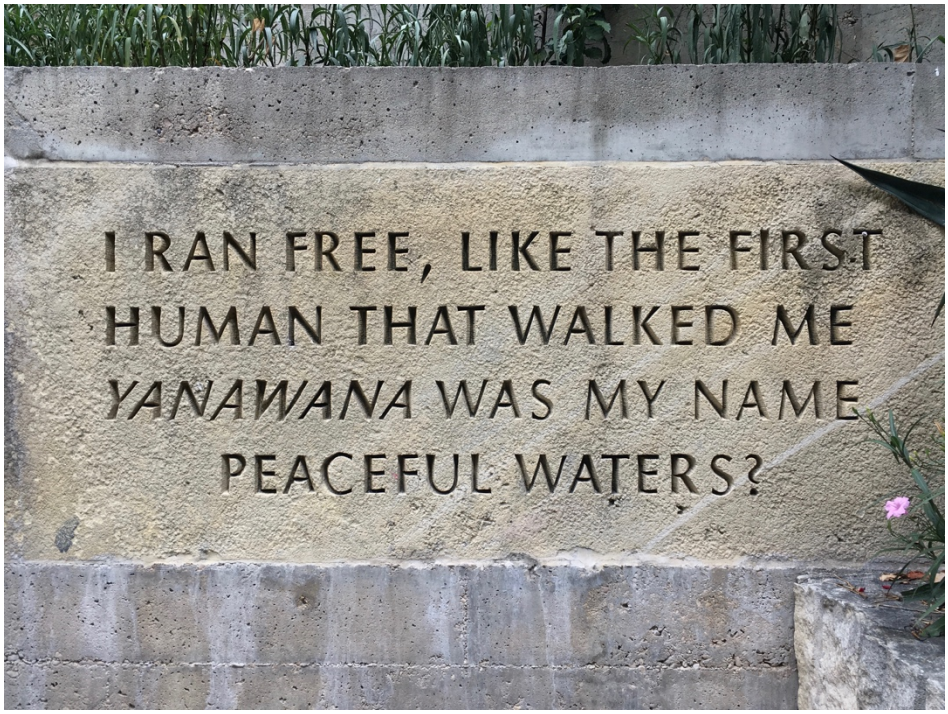

Figure 2: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the second landing.

Figure 3: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the second landing.

Figure 4: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. First landing.

Figure 5: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the first landing.

Figure 6: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the first landing.

Figure 7: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Fifth landing.

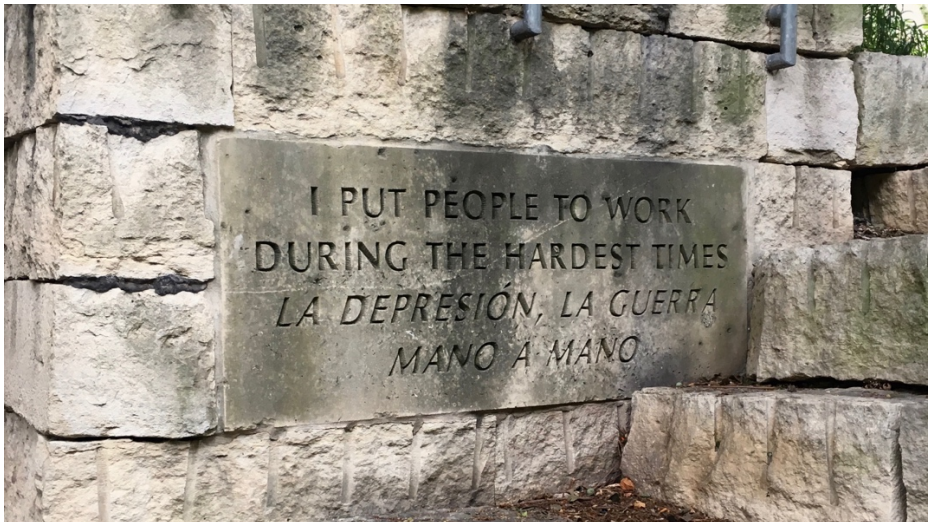

Figure 8: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the fifth landing.

Figure 9: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the fifth landing.

Figure 10: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the fourth landing.

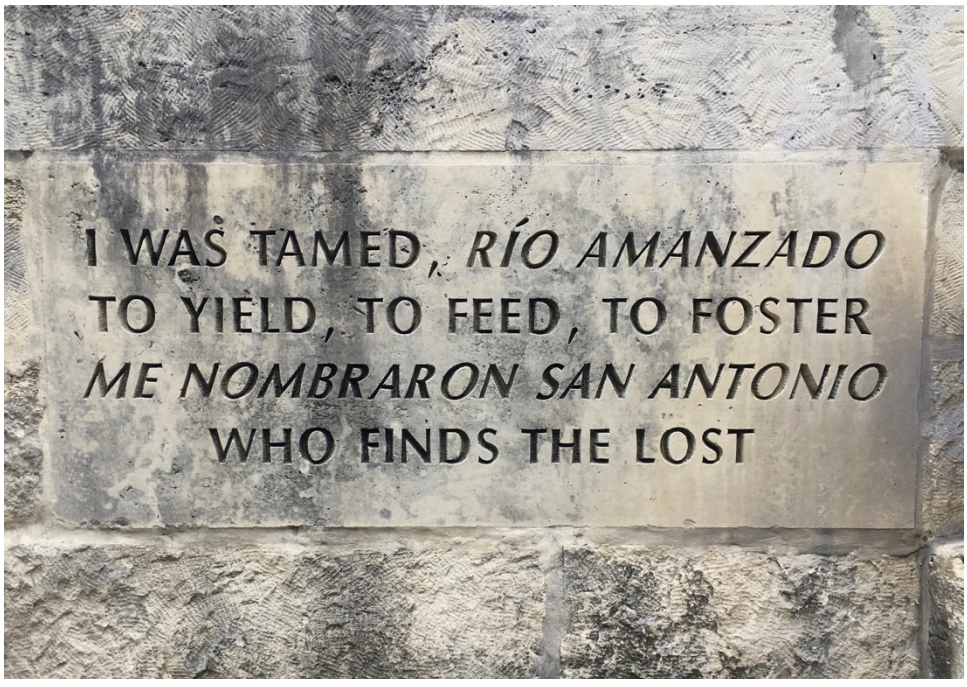

Figure 11: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the third landing.

Figure 12: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the third landing.

Figure 13: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Sixth landing.

Figure 14: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the sixth landing.

Figure 15: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *El Río Habla*, 2000-01. Detail of the sixth landing.

Figure 16: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Downtown Garland Station, Dallas Area Rapid Transit Station Art and Design Program, Garland, Texas, 1998-2002.

Figure 17: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Downtown Garland Station, 1998-2002. Detail of clocktower.

Figure 18: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Downtown Garland Station, 1998-2002. Detail of one column.

Figure 19: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Downtown Garland Station, 1998-2002. Detail of station design.

Figure 20: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Downtown Garland Station, 1998-2002. Detail of wave motif.

Figure 21: Installation view of *Concentrations 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground*, Dallas Museum of Art, 1991. Dallas Museum of Art Archives, Exhibition Photography.

Figure 22: Installation view of *Concentrations 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground*, Dallas Museum of Art, 1991. Dallas Museum of Art Archives, Exhibition Photography.

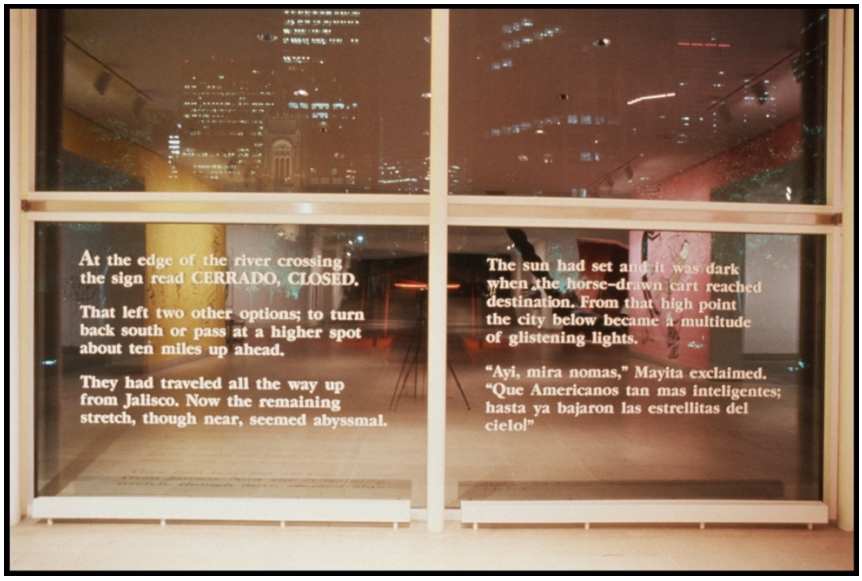

Figure 23: Installation view of *Concentrations 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground*, Dallas Museum of Art, 1991. Dallas Museum of Art Archives, Exhibition Photography.

Figure 24: Installation view of *Concentrations 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Abriendo Tierra/Breaking Ground*, Dallas Museum of Art, 1991. Dallas Museum of Art Archives, Exhibition Photography.

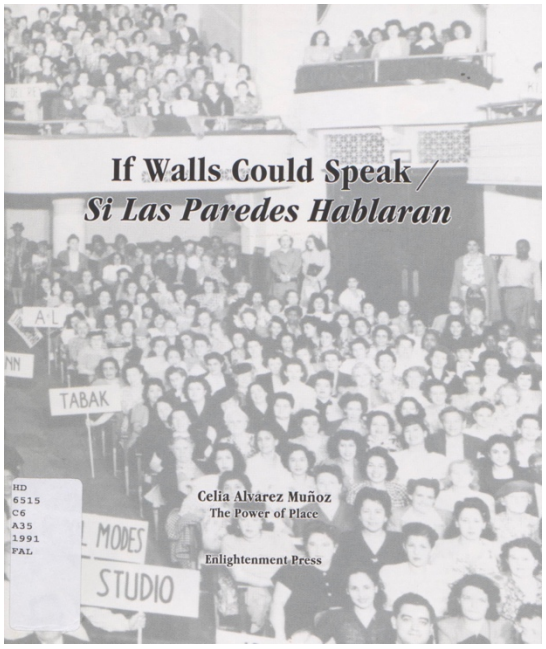

Figure 25: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 1991. Detail of cover.

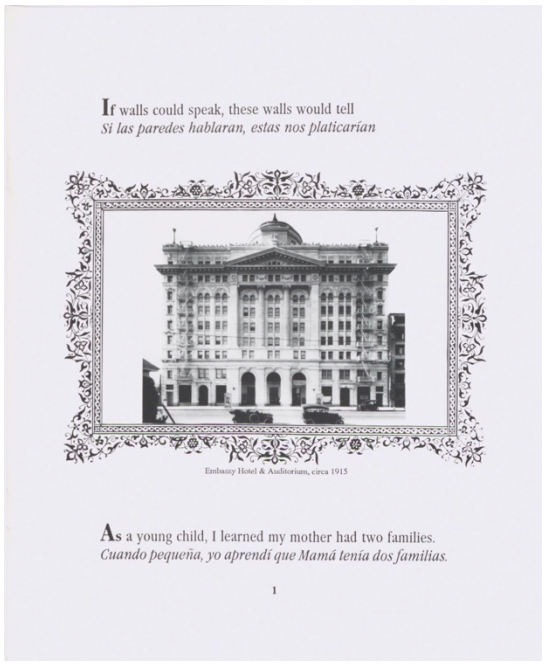

Figure 26: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 1991. Detail of page.

Figure 27: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 1991. Detail of page.

Figure 28: Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, 1991. Detail of two-page spread.

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